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Our view

Government too big to be measured

Even people who are convinced that government is too big don't know exactly how big it is — because part of its bigness is of a dimension that defies most kinds of measuring. Like radiation, it envelops, penetrates and engulfs.

One measure is all government spending relative to the gross national product. Before World War I it was usually about 6 to 7 percent a year. During the war it zoomed to 21 percent plus. Then it fell to little more than its prewar level.

After the Depression hit, it rose to 14-15 percent and stayed there during the New Deal era, reflecting vigorous government spending and a lesser degree of economic controls than came later.

At its peak during World War II it was more than 46 percent. From 1946 until 1950 it ranged around 11-15 percent. During the Korean War it rose to 22.5 percent. It has remained at about one-fifth of GNP ever since.

There's more to it than that. If transfer payments are added to spending for goods and services, the percentage rises to more than one-third of GNP.

Another measure is the percentage of employed on the government payroll: 5 to 6 percent during the 1920s; 11 to 14 percent during the 1930s when millions were employed in emergency programs; rising from 9 percent after the end of World War II to about 15 percent since the 1960s.

The biggest expansions of government in recent decades are not easy to measure, yet they may be more significant than the growth that can be gauged. Who can with any degree of certainty total the billions spent because of government regulations and orders from federal agencies and federal courts?

Some of the most critical areas of governmental growth are almost beyond measuring. In the Freeman, in his article, "Where Figures Fail; Measuring the Growth of Big Government," Robert Higgs, author and professor of economics at the University of Washington, points out that the essence of Big Government is coercive power.

This power originates, he says, in the actions of regulatory agencies, legislatures and the courts. Often they extend their sway without spending a cent. By the time opponents of Big Government realize what has happened, Higgs says, "the horse has long since escaped from the barn. Entrenched bureaucrats and program beneficiaries make it almost impossible to undo what's been done."

He has some wisdom on strategy: "Limiting the scope of modern Big Government requires more than containing its expenditure, taxation and employment. It is essential that the creation and extension of governmental authority be restrained at its sources. Here as elsewhere, an ounce of prevention works more effectively than a pound of cure."

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